

Act, BCA, and \$31 billion above the administration's budget request. If the authorized funding level were to be appropriated, without changing the caps, it would trigger a 12-percent across-the-board sequester of Defense programs to bring spending levels back to the Fiscal Year 2018 levels contained in the Budget Control Act. A sequester of this size would hit us in readiness. It would hamper our day-to-day operations and maintenance. It would hurt our troops. Our military leaders do not support such a sequester.

If we really want to support our military and the men and women in uniform, we must immediately reach a bipartisan budget deal to lift the artificial and unrealistically low budget caps that were set in law in 2011. It is hard to get every Member of this Chamber to agree on anything, but on this, we can agree: Sequester has had a negative impact on our country that will impact a generation. We need to have an honest conversation about what the needs of our country are, both in military and domestic spending, and draft our spending bills accordingly.

I do appreciate the work that Senator McCAIN and Senator REED have put into this massive legislation. While my concerns with the funding levels authorized in this bill prevent me from supporting it, I do believe it reflects a strong commitment to the programs and policies that support our service members and their families. That must always be our goal.

I am pleased that the conferenced bill maintains support for medical research that matter so much to our servicemembers and to all Americans who benefit from the lifesaving results made possible through these programs. I am also grateful for the inclusion of language I authored that would pave the way for piloting a preventative mental health program for our National Guard and Reserve. Like physical health, we know that, with particular training and mental preparation, a person can be more resilient mentally when faced with challenges, and building that readiness is necessary to maintain the all-volunteer force. Progress is already being made with shifting to a preventative model in the Special Forces community. I hope to soon see similar progress in developing models for the members of our Guard and Reserve.

This final bill also includes several amendments I proposed to make sure U.S. efforts, especially in Afghanistan, are consistent with U.S. values. These include a provision aimed at improving the way the Departments of Defense and State provide human rights training to partner forces, and a requirement to establish a plan on how to improve our ability to help foreign governments protect civilians. The final bill also authorizes establishment of a position in the Department of Defense to oversee its implementation of and coordination with the Department of State on the Leahy law for human

rights vetting for Afghan security forces.

In 3 weeks and 1 day, the current resolution funding our government will expire; yet, instead of sitting down with Democrats to work together, just as we did earlier this year to enact the fiscal year 2017 omnibus spending bill, to find a path forward to raise the budget caps and fund our government for the rest of the fiscal year, Republicans are focused on a tax cut bill that will add \$1.5 trillion to the debt. Instead of acting responsibly and in the greatest traditions of the Senate, the majority is marching towards another partisan fight on the floor on a deeply flawed tax bill that will impact every corner of our economy.

Let's get to work for the American people. For months, have been calling for a bipartisan budget deal to lift the caps on both sides for both defense and nondefense programs based on parity. It is time to complete those negotiations. We owe it to the men and women who serve. We owe it to the American people.

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that all time be considered yielded back.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

The question is on agreeing to the conference report.

The conference report was agreed to.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will now resume executive session.

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR—Continued

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, all postcloture time on the Coggins and Friedrich nominations is yielded back.

VOTE ON COGGINS NOMINATION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the Coggins nomination?

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, I ask for the yeas and nays.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there a sufficient second?

There appears to be a sufficient second.

The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk called the roll.

Mr. CORNYN. The following Senator is necessarily absent: the Senator from Arizona (Mr. McCAIN).

Mr. DURBIN. I announce that the Senator from New Jersey (Mr. BOOKER), the Senator from Minnesota (Mr. FRANKEN), and the Senator from New Jersey (Mr. MENENDEZ) are necessarily absent.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. PERDUE). Are there any other Senators in the Chamber desiring to vote?

The result was announced—yeas 96, nays 0, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 280 Ex.]

YEAS—96

Alexander	Flake	Nelson
Baldwin	Gardner	Paul
Barrasso	Gillibrand	Perdue
Bennet	Graham	Peters
Blumenthal	Grassley	Portman
Blunt	Harris	Reed
Boozman	Hassan	Risch
Brown	Hatch	Roberts
Burr	Heinrich	Rounds
Cantwell	Heitkamp	Rubio
Capito	Heller	Sanders
Cardin	Hirono	Sasse
Carper	Hoeben	Schatz
Casey	Inhofe	Schumer
Cassidy	Isakson	Scott
Cochran	Johnson	Shaheen
Collins	Kaine	Shelby
Coons	Kennedy	Stabenow
Corker	King	Strange
Cornyn	Klobuchar	Sullivan
Cortez Masto	Lankford	Tester
Cotton	Leahy	Thune
Crapo	Lee	Tillis
Cruz	Manchin	Toomey
Daines	Markey	Udall
Donnelly	McCaskey	Van Hollen
Duckworth	McConnell	Warner
Durbin	Merkley	Warren
Enzi	Moran	Whitehouse
Ernst	Murkowski	Wicker
Feinstein	Murphy	Wyden
Fischer	Murray	Young

NOT VOTING—4

Booker	McCain
Franken	Menendez

The nomination was confirmed.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the motion to reconsider is considered made and laid upon the table and the President will be immediately notified of the Senate's action.

The majority leader.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I move to proceed to legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion.

The motion was agreed to.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I move to proceed to executive session to consider Calendar No. 481, Gregory Katsas.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion.

The motion was agreed to.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the nomination.

The bill clerk read the nomination of Gregory G. Katsas, of Virginia, to be United States Circuit Judge for the District of Columbia Circuit.

CLOTURE MOTION

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I send a cloture motion to the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The cloture motion having been presented under rule XXII, the Chair directs the clerk to read the motion.

The bill clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby

move to bring to a close debate on the nomination of Gregory G. Katsas, of Virginia, to be United States Circuit Judge for the District of Columbia Circuit.

Mitch McConnell, Mike Rounds, Chuck Grassley, Richard Burr, Thom Tillis, John Hoeven, Ben Sasse, Roy Blunt, Johnny Isakson, Tom Cotton, Ron Johnson, Mike Lee, James Lankford, Jerry Moran, Lindsey Graham, Roger F. Wicker, Bob Corker.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the mandatory quorum call be waived.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION BILL

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, just a moment ago, the Senate acted to send the President one of the most important policy bills we consider each year—the National Defense Authorization Act.

Not only will this legislation authorize the resources, capabilities, pay, and benefits our men and women in uniform need to perform their missions, but this year's bill also goes further. It takes a notable step toward authorizing the resources needed to start rebuilding our military and restoring combat readiness.

It will help improve our missile defense capabilities and better prepare us to deal with cyber threats. It will authorize a well-deserved pay raise for our men and women in uniform while providing for continued reform of the benefits they and their families rely upon, and it will support the thousands of military servicemembers and families serving at military installations in Kentucky and in the Kentucky National Guard.

Further, this bill strives to bring reform to the Pentagon. As Senator MCCAIN said of the NDAA a few months ago, it will “[build] upon the sweeping reforms that Congress has passed in recent years.” He is right, and none of this would have been possible without him, without his leadership.

I think I can speak for everyone in this Chamber when I say that our friend Senator MCCAIN has served with distinction as chairman of the Armed Services Committee. I know the ranking member on his committee, Senator REED, thinks so as well. I know a lot of Members on both sides of the aisle do too.

Senator MCCAIN's commitment to our men and women in uniform is obvious, and it is unwavering. He respects these brave Americans immensely; he cares about them deeply; and he understands better than just about anyone how important a bill like this is to them, not only on a policy level but on a personal level as well.

The NDAA he worked so hard to pass has now cleared both Chambers. It is headed to the President's desk. Soon, it will become law. When it does, it will stand as yet another testament to the hard work, dedication, and unflappable determination of our colleague and friend Senator JOHN MCCAIN—truly, an American hero.

TRIBUTE TO BRIAN FOREST

Mr. President, on an entirely different matter, I would like to say a few words today about Brian Forest, a key member of my legislative office team, who is leaving the Senate after several years of outstanding work in the Senate.

Throughout his time in my office, Brian has been an invaluable asset, taking on the daily challenges and countless responsibilities which come with the territory for my staff, but Brian did not just handle it all—he excelled. Regardless of the pressures, the deadlines, or the obstacles—and, believe me, there were many—Brian always came through.

Now, regretfully, he has decided to take on a whole new set of challenges. I am confident he will continue to show the same skill, friendship, and good humor that endeared him to many in the Senate because that is who Brian is.

I know I speak for all of those on my staff when I say I am really sorry to see him go. I wish Brian well in his new adventures, and I thank him for his service to our Nation, to the Senate, and to me.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oklahoma.

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I be recognized as in morning business for such time as I shall consume.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

MUSEUM OF THE BIBLE

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, this week, after 3 years of planning and construction, we now will be dedicating tomorrow and officially opening the Museum of the Bible.

This is led by Steve Green of Hobby Lobby. We all remember Hobby Lobby of Oklahoma. Steve has been a friend of mine and his parents have been friends of mine for a long period of time. He is the chairman of the board of directors for this long-awaited museum that will allow visitors from not just this country but from all over the world—they will be coming here to see what it is all about and how this plays a pivotal role in our country's history. There is no better place than Washington, DC, in our Nation's Capitol, to remind us of the scope of the Bible's impact on our history and our narrative. It has been long-awaited.

Indeed, one of our Founding Fathers, Patrick Henry, was renowned for his readings of the Bible. He said at the end of his life: “This book is worth all the books that ever were printed, and it has been my misfortune that I never found time to read it with the proper attention and feeling till lately.”

He is the one—and not many people are aware that historians are relooking at the history of this country, and they are saying we could not have won that war. I mean you have to sometimes close your eyes and envision the greatest army on the face of this Earth com-

ing down with thundering marches, going through Boston, and going up to Lexington and Concord. There is no way in this world that a handful of trappers and hunters could have won that thing. Yet we know why, and he knew why, when you talk about Patrick Henry. They said: We are not strong enough. It can't be done.

There is one thing they overlooked, and that is the strength that comes from God that we had, and they didn't have. He said:

We are not weak if we make a proper use of those means which the God of nature hath placed in our power. . . . armed in the holy cause of liberty, and in such a country as that which we possess, are invincible by any force which our enemy can send against us. Besides, sir, we shall not fight our battles alone. There is a just God who [reigns] over the destinies of nations; and who will raise up friends to fight our battles for us.

And he did, and they fired that shot heard around the world.

I think that is really important today to think about because people come to this country and they want to know what makes America work.

I have been privileged to sponsor the African dinner every February, and people come in from all over Africa. They are always surprised when they come and they find out walking through the Capitol what real significance God and the Bible has to the history of this country. We are the largest Christian community in the world. We cannot and should not deny the role our Judeo-Christian values played in the formation of this country.

Our first President, George Washington, was steadfast in his belief of God, His law, and that liberty is God's gift. Washington's leadership was based on the conviction that Americans are entrusted by God to preserve basic freedoms established in the Constitution.

In a letter, Washington wrote, “We should be very cautious of violating the rights of conscience in others, ever considering that God alone is the judge of the hearts of men and to Him only in this case they are answerable.”

It is clear our Founding Fathers recognized and enshrined the importance of religious liberty, one of our most precious and foundational religious freedoms that allowed them to live their lives according to the teaching of the Bible.

The Bible's role in the founding of America is just one remarkable example of how the Bible has profoundly shaped world history. It has influenced cultures in every corner of the globe, and the Museum of the Bible, which is going to be opening tomorrow, pays tribute to its impact and intersectionality with the world religions.

Whether considering the Bible through a secular or faith-based lens, it is impossible to deny its impact on individuals, countries, and, indeed, all world history. The Museum of the

Bible is the first educational experience I have encountered that truly appreciates the full magnitude of the Bible's role throughout history.

The six exhibits, curated by a panel of faith leaders that span religious and geographic divides, truly bring the Word of God to life in a way that positively educates, informs, and encourages people of all faiths and beliefs to learn more about the Bible.

General Washington reminded us in his Farewell Address: "Let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion."

Steve Green's father David founded Hobby Lobby. I remember this so well because I was in the State legislature at the time this happened. They started in their garage making frames for pictures. It turned out to be this giant, worldwide corporation, the largest arts and crafts retailer in the history of America, currently or in the past.

Remember Hobby Lobby, when ObamaCare required that all employers provide free access to the pills that terminate pregnancies, David clearly recognized this as a violation of his faith. That is what America is all about. If you believe in it, you do it, you take a risk. He was risking millions of dollars, but the morality was so significant from the teachings of the Bible that he went ahead and did it. He took the challenge all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court and won in a split decision. He successfully argued the importance to maintain the fundamental freedom of religion to apply his faith convictions to how he operates his private business.

David won his case, but his family understood we needed to do more. So he started the Museum of the Bible. I actually was there last June, when it was under construction at the time, as we walked through and visualized what it was going to look like later on. It is magnificent.

They have a stage, and you live on the stage. He is going to have performances there. I am so anxious to be there tonight, the night before the official opening, to see now what it looks like.

I am so grateful David's son Steve and his entire family are leading this effort to make the Bible and its impact more accessible to the whole world. I am especially honored that the museum will open on my birthday tomorrow. I am not sure they really knew that when they made the decision, but somebody knew it.

ENERGY INDEPENDENCE

Mr. President, let me turn to another topic that I think is very important right now; that is, our energy independence. It is a huge issue. People are not aware, while we may have talked about the importance of the budget reconciliation process to set up and to pass the historic and much needed tax cuts for our individuals and small businesses, the process also allowed the Senate to use reconciliation for some-

thing equally as valuable—to allow energy exploration in Alaska.

Yesterday the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee met to consider legislation to open up a very small part of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for responsible energy development. This bill was successfully passed by the committee, and I look forward to helping it continue to move through Congress.

I have long been an advocate for this to happen. It is interesting, the people in Alaska all want it. The polling is something like 96 percent of the people really want this to happen. They know the benefits that will come to Alaska, the money that will be there. People talk about the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as if it is this great big thing. It is the size of South Carolina. It is a very small thing. Right now, we are going to be able to go up there to create jobs and opportunities and authorize the leases in Alaska. We will also increase revenue to the United States.

It is estimated that the energy production in Alaska could lead to over \$1 trillion in revenue. Responsible management will have a positive impact on reducing our national debt and most significantly opening ANWR is allowing Alaska to do what they want to do.

We are so good in this body thinking that we know more about what is good for Alaska and what is good for Oklahoma and what is good for Georgia than they do in their own States. One of few things we do right around this place is how we do our highway bill. In the highway bill, we get the priorities from the States when they come in, and they decide what it is they want to do in their States.

Remember the issue about the "bridge to nowhere." Everybody was concerned about this. All the talk shows jumped on it without realizing, until it was too late, it had already gotten committed.

Here was something that happened right for a change. I was chairman of the committee at that time. The "bridge to nowhere" in Alaska didn't go "nowhere," it went somewhere. The problem was, there weren't any people there once you got there, and the reason is you couldn't get there. On their list of 100 priorities, No. 4 was to build that bridge, but we, in our infinite wisdom here, said: No, you can't do that. Somehow the public didn't know what they were talking about. Well, that is kind of the same situation we have right now. We have something in Alaska that was their No. 1 priority to develop, and for years and years we have stopped them from being able to do with their land what they wanted to do with their land. The Federal Government has been keeping Alaskans from acting in their own best interest.

Finally, increasing energy production in Alaska is a key part of making the United States not only energy independent but energy dominant. We are on the verge of doing just that. Earlier this week, the Executive Direc-

tor of the International Energy Agency, Fatih Birol, said the United States "will become the undisputed global oil and gas leader for decades to come" and that "the growth in production is unprecedented, exceeding all historical levels." ANWR could be and should be a part of that story.

Energy independence is vital to our national security. How many of these countries over there that have been part of the old Soviet Union want their allegiance to us, and yet they are forced to buy their oil and gas from Russia and from Iran and they don't want to do it. Now we are taking them off the hook.

I had a great experience not long ago. I was invited by the President of Lithuania to come and open up their first terminal. Now we are changing all that.

We have a guy named Harold Hamm, an Oklahoman who is the chairman and CEO of Continental Resources in Oklahoma. He announced they would begin exporting oil to China. Exporting to China is kind of a big deal. He talks about how we are going to become undeniably a leader in exporting energy that will have an impact on the rest of the world.

President Trump has been clear that he intends to make the United States a net energy exporter, something we haven't been since 1953. Opening up the National Wildlife Refuge, which just took place this last week, will be a big step toward this initiative, and I applaud the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee for helping the administration make this happen.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION BILL

Mr. President, the leader of the Senate, a few minutes ago, talked about the NDAA and JOHN MCCAIN's role in that. JOHN MCCAIN, of course, has been and is an American hero. Everybody knows his past and knows what he did and the suffering he went through.

He was very instrumental—sure, we had some disagreements on some of the finer parts of the bill—but this is one that had to be done. All of a sudden we are changing what happened, unfortunately, in the past.

I can remember about 3 years ago we got all the way to December before we voted this out. We have now voted. This is the 55th year in a row that we have passed a Defense authorization bill. If we didn't by the end of December, then our kids wouldn't be getting hazard pay or pilots wouldn't be getting flight pay, and it would be an absolute disaster. Of course, it didn't happen because we are now doing it.

I have to say this. One thing that hasn't been said enough is what Senator MCCAIN and a lot of his supporters were able to do; that is, reprioritize what defending America is about.

Read the Constitution. Look at the history of this country. I always say people should sometime get out that old document that nobody reads anymore, the Constitution, and see what we are supposed to be doing around here.

Do you know that what we are supposed to be doing in this body primarily is defending America, No. 1, and they called them post roads, back then, building roads and transportation. That is what we are supposed to be doing, but what has happened in our military is something people don't know about. I applaud our military in uniform now because they are saying it for the first time in my memory that we are in the most threatened position this country has ever been in. We have adversaries out there. Some are somewhat mentally deranged. They are rapidly getting or already have the capability of hitting an American city with a weapon. As tragic as it was when we went through 9/11, what a lot of people don't realize is, if that were to happen, a whole city could be wiped out.

The problem is that we have gotten away from prioritizing the fact that the No. 1 concern should be and the mission should be for us to defend America. To give an example, up through the 1960s, we spent over 50 percent of all the revenue that came into the Federal Government on defending America. Do you know what it is today, Mr. President? It is 15 percent. So we have gone from 50 percent down to 15 percent. What does that tell you? It tells you that the priorities aren't right.

So we have looked at this, and this is a first step. This MCCAIN-led NDAA is the first step in reprioritizing where we are. If anyone questions this, if you look at the Obama administration, when we were trying to recover on sequestration, he had a policy. He said: For every dollar we put in, we are going to have to put an equal amount into social programs. That shows you the lack of priority. All that is being changed.

About 10 minutes ago when I started, I quoted Patrick Henry. You stop and think about the courage it took at one time to get to the point that we are going to be progressing to, starting with this bill, when he said: There is a just God who reigns over the destinies of nations and who will raise up friends to fight our battles with us. The battle is not to the strong alone but to the vigilant, the active, the brave. Gentlemen may cry "peace," but there is no peace. Why stand we idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, is peace so sweet, it must be bought at the price of chains and slavery?

That is what it used to be. That was the priority. And this bill reestablishes that priority as the No. 1 priority, as our history reflects we should be doing, as our Constitution has charged us with doing, and we are doing it with the passage of the national defense authorization bill. We are on the road to recovery, and I am very excited about it.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. PETERS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

REPUBLICAN TAX PLAN

Mr. PETERS. Mr. President, I rise today to make a simple request of my colleagues on the other side of the aisle. When it comes to the tax legislation that Republican colleagues are rushing through Congress, please stop, slow down, and let's start over together.

We need real tax reform with clear policy goals that will make our Nation more competitive, not a partisan attempt to pass something—anything—that can get 51 Republican votes in the Senate. Our shared policy goals should be making the Tax Code fairer, simpler, and fiscally responsible. If we can achieve these goals, that would be real tax reform.

If we worked together, we could take long overdue steps and build a tax code that lets working families in Michigan and across the country keep more of their hard-earned money, levels the playing field for our small businesses, and keeps good jobs here at home in the United States. Fairer, simpler, responsible—those are three key points making a tax code that works. If we don't start over, I am afraid the current tax legislation will fail on all three accounts.

First, this tax legislation is not fair. It dramatically moves toward benefiting the wealthiest people in this Nation, with only a little sliver of the benefits going to working-class families.

The Republican tax bill was clearly written to cut rates for CEOs and large corporations and treats the middle class like an afterthought. I would argue that working Americans who are struggling with stagnant wages—while the cost of prescription drugs, college, and housing continue to rise—need tax cuts that are built around them.

Instead, we are looking at a Republican tax plan that repeals the alternative minimum tax—a fail-safe designed specifically to make sure that wealthy Americans cannot deduct their way to paying nothing in taxes. From what little we have seen of President Trump's tax returns, we know that the AMT—the alternative minimum tax—is the only reason he paid income taxes at all. The Republican bill will eliminate the AMT, and President Trump and folks like him will receive a huge windfall and may not have to pay any taxes at all—zero.

Wall Street loves this bill, too, because hedge funds will continue to be taxed at lower rates than small businesses in our local communities. This means many hedge fund managers making millions of dollars will have a lower tax rate than an office assistant working at their firm. Simply put, this

proposal fails on the test of making the Tax Code fairer.

I also believe this effort fails on the test of making the code simpler. For small business owners back in Michigan, they want to spend their time doing what they know best, which is running their business, not spending days or weeks trying to figure out the taxes they owe. But, as many of my colleagues in the Finance Committee have pointed out throughout this week, the provisions for a small business passthrough serve only to make a complicated tax code even more complicated—yes, even more complicated.

Expert analysis says that the passthrough provisions will require years of rulemakings and thousands of pages of additional rules and regulations. As a small business owner, unless your hobby is studying the Internal Revenue Code, this bill is going to make your life a whole lot more difficult.

Finally, on the last test, the test of whether or not this bill is responsible, this proposal fails miserably. Writing responsible tax legislation means making hard choices—closing loopholes and balancing out the pros and cons of any action.

Congress has the responsibility to take seriously the threat of a growing national debt, and we have to think about this when changing our Tax Code. But instead of working to reduce our debt, which we are passing on to our children and grandchildren, this proposal actually adds more than \$1 trillion to our deficit. And it would be even more expensive, but in a haphazard attempt to limit the cost, the majority has put forward a bill where hundreds of millions of dollars of provisions that middle-class families could use to reduce their taxes expire at random times over the next few years.

When you add it all up and factor in the additional interest costs to carry this new debt, you have a proposal that adds over \$2 trillion to the Federal debt, according to the nonpartisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget. It is wildly irresponsible to pile on this debt to finance a tax break for the wealthiest people in this country, but it doesn't have to be that way.

Tax reform can be bipartisan. The goal of tax reform must be fairer, simpler, and responsible. This isn't just idealism or wishful thinking. We have seen it happen before. When Ronald Reagan worked with Congress to pass tax reform in 1986, the bill received 97 votes in the U.S. Senate—yes, 97 votes. That is the sort of bipartisan approach we need, and we need to start working on that now.

Michiganders—and all Americans—deserve a tax code that is fairer, simpler, and more responsible, not more multinational corporate giveaways and more debt.

I will not stop fighting for hard-working American families and small businesses who deserve to see more take-home pay, and I hope my colleagues on the other side of the aisle will join me.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. COONS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. COONS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that upon the conclusion of my remarks, the Senator from Rhode Island be recognized.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. COONS. Mr. President, I rise today to express my deep concern with the tax reform bill that the Senate Finance Committee is likely to approve later this week. The latest version of this massive tax bill, which will impact every single American, was only released to the public late Tuesday night. Less than 48 hours later, the Finance Committee is ramming through this bill on a party-line vote without any hearings and without a thorough review of the bill.

I strongly disagree with the closed-door process of developing the substance of a bill which skews the benefits to the wealthy at the expense of middle-class families and with this bill's irresponsible cost of \$1.7 trillion over 10 years. I also want to tell my colleagues and the President that there is still an opportunity for us to do the right thing and to work together on tax reform.

We should follow the example of the last time there was successful tax reform enacted by Congress. This was led by Republican President Ronald Reagan, Democratic Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill, and Members of Congress from both parties, who worked together back in 1986 to pass major tax reform legislation. Sure, they had strong disagreements, but they held lengthy public debates, compromised on both sides of the aisle, and eventually passed a major tax reform bill that was bipartisan, was fair, and did not add to our deficits and national debt.

For some reason, my Republican colleagues seem to have forgotten the example of the last time the Congress actually passed tax reform. It happened because both parties worked together. It happened because both parties compromised. And while I believe there is still time for us to undertake this approach, what we are seeing right now is the exact opposite. I think that is a big mistake.

When I am on the train back to Wilmington or when I am at home in my State of Delaware hearing from my constituents, my message about this bill is simple: I am worried what this bill will do to our fiscal health as a country and the middle class, and you should be too.

Let me start by quoting a story from the Washington Post today whose

headline reads "Senate tax bill cuts taxes of wealthy and hikes taxes on families earning under \$75,000 over a decade." Let me repeat that. The Senate tax bill cuts the taxes of the wealthy and hikes taxes on families earning under \$75,000. The story is based on a report from the nonpartisan Joint Commission on Taxation which shows that the claims from President Trump and my Republican colleagues that this bill is all about tax relief for the middle class are simply wrong.

I will quote from this story:

By the year 2027, Americans earning \$30,000 to \$75,000 a year—

Solidly middle-class folks—

would also be forced to pay more in taxes even though people earning over \$100,000 would continue to get substantial tax cuts.

Unfortunately, though, that is not the end of my concerns with this legislation. I am also alarmed by how much this bill would add to our Nation's budget deficits and by the long-term impacts it would have on our debt.

According to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, this tax bill—this Republican-only tax bill—will cost over \$1.7 trillion over 10 years. That is \$1.7 trillion with a "t." What happened to my colleagues who spent years talking about the danger posed by a growing national debt? Now these very same Senators and Representatives are willing to put almost \$2 trillion on our Nation's credit card. It is an astounding figure—more than twice as large as the emergency stimulus package Congress passed in 2009 to prevent the next Great Depression. It is more than twice as much as the much maligned so-called bailout that Congress authorized to prevent the collapse of the financial system.

What does \$1.7 trillion buy us? What is the great return on investment that would justify borrowing \$1.7 trillion—mostly from China—in a time of near record-low unemployment? The Speaker of the House, PAUL RYAN, publicly bragged that their tax plan would produce 1 million jobs. That sounds good but not when you consider the cost. My math may not be great, but if you spend \$1.7 trillion to get 1 million jobs, that is \$1.5 million per job. That is not a great return on investment.

To add insult to injury, the majority believes they can use this bill to also cut access to healthcare for millions of Americans because they have decided at the last moment to include a repeal of the Affordable Care Act's individual mandate—a critical part of that bill—law, which helps ensure a healthy risk pool, which, in turn, lowers premiums.

Those who actually work in healthcare know this is a bad idea. That is why the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Family Physicians, the American Hospital Association, and America's Health Insurance Plans have all come out against the inclusion of the individual mandate repeal in this bill, saying that "eliminating the individual mandate by itself likely will result in a

significant increase in premiums, which would substantially increase the number of uninsured Americans."

The nonpartisan CBO agrees. They found that repealing the mandate will cause 13 million people to lose their healthcare by 2027, and average premiums would increase about 10 percent each year.

The inclusion of the mandate repeal to pay for corporate tax cuts will hurt middle-class families across our country. It is politics at its worst, throwing aside the needs of our constituents to ensure that a small group of the wealthy get wealthy. That is because the core of this bill is based on a promise proven false time and again—that tax cuts for the richest Americans and most profitable corporations will somehow trickle down to help the majority of working Americans. We know that is not how our economy has actually worked. Even President Reagan's own budget director, David Stockman, said yesterday that this bill isn't going to increase wages for the middle class.

The Senate bill proposes we cut the top corporate rate nearly in half; exempt more wealthy individuals from the estate tax, which impacts only the top 0.2 percent of Americans; repeal the alternative minimum tax, which affects those making hundreds of thousands annually; and cut tax rates for those earning over \$1 million.

Altogether, the core elements of this plan amount to \$1.7 trillion in tax cuts, and my Republican colleagues are simply asking us to trust them that the benefits will somehow reach the middle class.

If that isn't enough to prove that this bill being rushed through in today's markup is bad policy, my colleagues in the majority went one step further in this latest version by eliminating all tax breaks for middle-class families in 8 years while making the tax cuts for corporations permanent. This means that millions of middle-class families will see a tax hike in the future in order to fund permanency for corporate tax breaks. That is just not right.

So here is what I think we should do. Let's slow down. Let's work together, Republicans and Democrats, to pass a bill that is actually good for all Americans. I believe we can get that done. I think it is our job and our duty. We don't have to start from scratch. There are bipartisan ideas. There are introduced, bipartisan tax bills that could make our code simpler and fairer and more effective.

I will mention two examples of bills I have introduced—one with Republican Senator SHELLEY MOORE CAPITO and another with Republican Senator PAT ROBERTS—that encourage manufacturers to use made-in-America parts and incentivize companies that invent something here to make it here. I have introduced another bill with Republican Senator JERRY MORAN—it has eight bipartisan cosponsors—and with Republican Congressman TED POE that would alter the Tax Code to boost

every aspect of the American energy industry, from oil and gas to the latest renewable and clean energy technologies. These are just a few ideas, but they represent a simple truth: that we can and should work together on tax reform instead of making this one more pointless, partisan battle.

The same thing is true for our healthcare system. The American people have overwhelmingly said they want a bipartisan and open process to fix healthcare, not a one-party scheme by either party that throws our system into chaos with no plan to replace it.

I encourage President Trump and Republican leaders to stop trying to pass tax reform with only Republicans and to reach across the aisle to work with Democrats and pass something we can all get behind.

TRIBUTE TO MEGAN O'NEILL

Mr. President, while I appreciate the opportunity to talk today about the very real need for bipartisan tax reform that helps working families, grows the economy, and doesn't increase our debt, I wish to turn to another important topic—the impending departure from my office of Megan O'Neill, my director of scheduling.

Megan has been a part of our office for more than 5 years. She leaves later this month for an exciting new opportunity in New York City.

Megan is quite simply one of the most capable, resourceful, intelligent, effective, and kind people I have ever had the honor of knowing or working with. One of the most well-worn sayings here in Washington is that “everyone is replaceable.” While that may be true for me, and it may be true for the Acting President *pro tempore*, and it may be true for many others here, it is simply not true of Megan. She is truly irreplaceable. I owe Megan a huge debt of gratitude for her years of service to my office, to Delaware, and to our country.

Many of us who have worked with her will gather to thank her and wish her well, but I also wanted to take a few minutes to talk about—and probably embarrass—this remarkable woman.

Megan is from nearby Chevy Chase, MD, but more important, at least in my opinion, is that she graduated from the University of Delaware as a “Fighting Blue Hen” with a degree in economics and international relations. She interned in my Wilmington office during her senior year at UD and quickly became a staff favorite.

Upon graduating, Megan moved to Washington, and I hired her as a staff assistant, working at the front desk in my DC office. It is a particularly demanding job—juggling visiting constituents, constant phone calls, and supervising interns. She proved herself to be mature and capable. I promoted her several times in quick succession until she took over as my director of scheduling in August of 2015.

Over the course of her time in my office, I have come to deeply respect her as a professional, but more impor-

tantly, I have come to admire her as a person. In addition to being incredibly competent, strategic, and quick on her feet, it is Megan's boundless patience and optimism I will most miss. Regardless of how stressful, jam-packed, and uncertain a day may be, Megan is always able to ensure that everything gets done; that every constituent is heard, every important issue is raised, and that this Senator doesn't lose his mind.

Megan is also famous for her seemingly permanent smile and sunny disposition. Some of her colleagues in my office chimed in with a few anecdotes. Oftentimes, I was told, throughout the day, Megan will announce she is off to get a “fun drink,” which might sound like a Margarita but is, in fact, always a raspberry lemonade-flavored Dasani sparkling water. When something comes up—whether it is a favorite TV show, album, or new restaurant, she exclaims: “That's my jam!” She also loves to travel, but one thing that makes her different is that when she has an upcoming trip, she is just as excited to plan it out minute by minute as she is to actually go.

I can't talk about Megan without mentioning her family. She speaks frequently and lovingly about her parents Michael and Donna O'Neill and her younger brother Matt. As anyone who knows Megan is well aware, each summer, she is a key part of O'Neill week when she joins her parents, brother, cousins, and extended family in beautiful Bethany Beach, DE, to play Olympic-style beach games, eat, drink, and enjoy each other's company.

Anyone who understands the Senate knows how essential schedulers are to everything that goes on here. No staffer has a more challenging, demanding, or complex role. We Senators have big vocabularies for our long-winded speeches, but the most important word a scheduler says is “no,” and Megan mastered the art of saying no in a firm, professional, appropriate way, even when this Senator seems to always want to say yes.

Schedulers wear too many hats to count. They are field generals, firefighters, political advisers, logisticians, psychologists, diplomats, managers, and air traffic controllers. They work as hard or harder than anyone else here but so often go unseen or unheard. Maybe that is why Senate schedulers are a very tight-knit group. Megan often speaks with great fondness and respect for her counterparts in other Senate offices, and it does not surprise me that they think highly of her.

One of Megan's counterparts said she is “always quick to share advice and ideas, and has been a great source of support when any [of] her colleagues need some kind words. She is efficient and effective while also being so nice and compassionate.”

Megan's compassion is, at the end of the day, what makes her such an incredible person and an irreplaceable

part of our team. Regardless of who someone may be, when they work with Megan, they are treated with dignity and respect. Time and again, I have heard from people who are so grateful for her generosity, patience, and kindness. I have seen her help and stick up for her colleagues, even when that was difficult to do.

Let me close by simply saying to my friend and colleague Megan O'Neill: Thank you. Thank you for everything you have done for me, for your colleagues, for your friends in the Senate, for the State of Delaware, and our country. The Senate is a place full of amazing, talented people, but even among them, you have stood out in your time here, and we will all miss you dearly. Thank you.

The ACTING PRESIDENT *pro tempore*. The Senator from Rhode Island is recognized.

REPUBLICAN TAX PLAN

Mr. REED. Mr. President, it is our responsibility to ensure that future generations will have greater opportunity and greater security than we inherited from our parents and our forebears. To accomplish this, we must put aside political expedience and take a sober look at the health of our national economy and our ability to keep our commitments at home and around the world. With this in mind, I rise to urge my colleagues to reject the partisan and fiscally irresponsible Republican tax proposals in the so-called Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. When we strip away the rosy, but false, economic projections and ideologically motivated economic theories the Republicans have been using to hype this bill, it is clear this bill trades away our nation's long-term economic health and the well-being of working Americans, the poor, the sick, and the old in order to benefit the wealthy. Moreover, this bill will take us trillions of dollars deeper into debt at a time when the costs of 16 years of debt-financed wars continue to mount. Republicans owe it to our country and to future generations who will be stuck with the multi-trillion-dollar cost of this bill to go back to the drawing board and produce a balanced and permanent bipartisan path forward on our Nation's broken Tax Code.

It does not take an economist to see that the Republican tax bill is a historic \$1.5 trillion transfer of wealth from poor and working Americans to the very wealthiest among us, but a few of its glaring injustices are worth mentioning. According to the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, it gives over twice as much tax relief to millionaires as it does to Americans making under \$50,000. Just 5,000 of the wealthiest American families will receive hundreds of billions of dollars over a decade in the form of estate tax breaks at a time when income and wealth inequality in this country are at historic highs. This transfer of wealth through estate tax repeal alone requires us to go back to the drawing board. On the other hand, the bill

raises taxes on 19.4 million households earning under \$200,000 by as much as \$500. Forty-six percent of households making under \$100,000 and 50 percent of households making under \$75,000 will either see their taxes go up over the next decade or see no change at all, and that is just the tip of the iceberg. While tax cuts for big corporations are made permanent, the Republican bill plans to claw back what little it gives to everyone else after a few years, setting up even bigger tax hikes for the middle class down the line. This does not even begin to cover the return of TrumpCare that has been added to this bill, which would take healthcare coverage away from 13 million Americans and drive up costs substantially for the poor, the sick, and the elderly.

This bill is a bad investment and, frankly, it is one we can ill afford. According to the Penn Wharton Budget Model provided by the University of Pennsylvania, the bill will reduce Federal revenue by as much as \$1.7 trillion and increase our national debt by \$2 trillion in the 10-year budget window. By 2040, this becomes \$3.6 trillion in lost Federal revenue and up to \$6.9 trillion in debt. We would take on all this debt for an estimated 0.4 to 0.9 percent boost in GDP. For \$1.5 trillion, we could make needed repairs to our streets and highways across America—creating tens of thousands of jobs in the process. We could pay off every American's credit card or student loan, or lift every American above the poverty line for years. Instead, this bill would put yet another massive charge on America's credit card that will not create jobs, will not trickle down, and most certainly will not pay for itself. We still have a \$5.6 trillion in deficits and interest payments from the Bush tax cuts to prove it. With over \$20 trillion in national debt, it is long past time to stop experimenting with people's lives and livelihoods to prove yet again there are no merits to supply-side economics. America has pressing needs and very real bills coming due.

Mr. President, I would like to spend the remaining time of my remarks addressing something about which we have heard far too little in this debate, and that is the impact on our national economic health of the unavoidable and compounding cost of 16 years of military conflict paid for almost entirely through debt. For the first time in our history, the United States reduced revenue—in the form of the Bush tax cuts—rather than the usual pay-as-you-go approach to financing the post-9/11 wars. While we debate potentially adding trillions of dollars to the debt for an ill-conceived tax bill, the costs of war are coming due.

According to calculations in the thorough report by the Costs of War Project by the Watson Institute at Brown University, “[e]ven if the U.S. stopped spending on war at the end of this fiscal year, interest costs alone on borrowing to pay for the wars will continue to grow apace . . . [f]uture inter-

est costs for overseas contingency operations spending alone are projected to add more than \$1 trillion to the national debt by 2023. By 2056, a conservative estimate is that the interest costs will be about \$8 trillion, unless the U.S. changes the way it pays for the wars.”

In a sense, what we are doing is mortgaging the future of our children and grandchildren as we continue to add debt, and this is unavoidable debt in so many cases. We know we cannot immediately stop our engagement in countries throughout the world—in Afghanistan, in the Middle East and other areas. And, frankly, we are facing tremendous challenges in the Korean Peninsula. The approximate combined President's budget request for the Departments of Defense, State, and USAID for fiscal year 2018 is \$14 billion for Iraq and Syria, and \$48.9 billion for Afghanistan.

Furthermore, these costs do not account for much needed maintenance and modernization of our military assets. For example, modernizing, operating, and sustaining our nuclear triad—which includes submarines, bombers, and ICBMs—is projected to cost \$1.2 trillion in 2017 dollars over the next 30 years. We are debating taking \$1.5 trillion and giving it to the wealthiest Americans when we know that we need an additional \$1.2 trillion over 30 years to secure the safety of the United States and the civility of the world through nuclear deterrence. This begs the very simple question: If we want to borrow \$1.5 trillion, why don't we invest it in a cost we know will come due—protecting our country and the world through the renovation and reinvigoration of our nuclear triad.

The Navy recently validated a requirement for 355 ships. This would require the Navy to purchase around 329 new ships over 30 years—an average cost of \$102 billion per year through 2047, which is 13 percent more than the \$90 billion needed to build and operate the current 254-ship fleet envisioned in the Navy's 2017 plan. Once again, we are committing ourselves to billions of dollars of costs to our Navy shipbuilding program while we are entertaining a 1.5 or more trillion-dollar tax giveaway to the wealthiest Americans. We know these costs are coming due, but we are fooling ourselves into thinking we can continue spending on credit forever.

We can expect even greater costs if our military increases end strength, as so many on both sides of the aisle are proposing. This is because of high operational tempo, which is not likely to diminish. For every additional 10,000 servicemembers, it costs roughly \$1.8 billion per year for pay and benefits, and to train and equip these personnel. If the Army grows to 580,000 personnel, it will cost an additional \$18 billion per year, but we are taking that money, and we are giving it in tax cuts, the prominent amount of which is going to the wealthiest Americans. We are not

investing it now in increasing our military forces. If the Air Force grows by 30,000 personnel, it will cost an additional \$6 billion per year. If the Marine Corps grows by 20,000 personnel, it will cost an additional \$3.6 billion per year. If you talk to the Commandant or Chief of Staff of the Air Force, they will tell you they have to increase the size of their force because of the operational tempo. Indeed, if you talk to the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, he will tell you they are in a desperate situation maintaining sufficient pilots to fly our aircraft. So we could be buying hundreds of new F-35 aircraft at a significant cost and watch them parked because we can't afford the flight crews to fly them and to maintain them. We know these costs are coming, and we are ignoring them until they come due. We are ignoring them now for the benefit of these tax cuts.

If we do not chart a responsible path forward on economic policy, we will leave all these costs to the next generation, to the detriment of our children, our national security, and our position of world leadership. Frankly, it might not be even that long before serious issues materialize. Once the markets determine that \$1.5 trillion is just a small fraction of what we still must pay to protect ourselves; to continue our commitment in Afghanistan, to continue to support allies across the globe, markets may learn very quickly that the deficit is beginning to devour us. The markets will react, as they have in the past. So we could see a serious problem long before even our children confront these debts.

That is why earlier today former Secretaries of Defense Leon Panetta, Chuck Hagel, and Ash Carter sent a letter to congressional leadership and the House and Senate Armed Services Committee leadership that warned us that the fiscal irresponsibility of the Republican tax proposal will contribute to a growing budget crisis. The letter urges Congress to instead address the sequester that threatens to “hollow out” our military's ability to sustain the commitments of its global missions.

Mr. President, tax policies have real consequences. We can debate the value of one tax proposal over another, but that is not the debate before us. The simple facts are that this tax bill will give breaks to the people who need them the least, take money from working Americans, leave millions of Americans sicker and worse off, and further strain our ability to keep America safe from growing and changing threats across the globe. It also threatens expenditures on healthcare, education, infrastructure, and other vital domestic needs as the debt balloons due to this bill's unaffordable tax breaks for corporate titans. This is not what we owe the next generation. It is not even what we owe our children today. I urge my colleagues across the aisle to consider our Nation's future and join us in opposing this legislation.

Like so many here, I was here in 2001 when President George W. Bush proposed his tax cuts, which I opposed, and assured us that our economy would grow, that jobs would multiply, that we would be fine. Let me remind my colleagues that he said this after we had made the tough decisions in the Clinton Administration that led to a projected surplus in the billions of dollars. The mantra from many people at the time was, let's give the money back to the American people.

We don't have a surplus today. We have a significant deficit. It will grow with this bill because this bill says that we are going to increase it by \$1.5 trillion at a minimum, and it will not be just \$1.5 trillion.

I suggest that, unless we abandon our commitments to the men and women of our Armed Forces, unless we decide to disengage from the deterrent that we must have to defend the Nation from a nuclear Armageddon, unless we decide to leave Afghanistan—after the President announced that no longer are we basing our decisions on time but on conditions—there will continue to be trillions and trillions of dollars of unavoidable costs that should be included in this debate.

This is not the time to take trillions of dollars and give a disproportionate share to the wealthiest Americans. This is the time for us to work together, to provide the resources for our military, to provide investments for our people, and to deal with the issue of inequality between the wealthiest 1 percent and everybody else. None of that is accomplished by this bill. In fact, this bill will complicate, compound, and make even more difficult the problems we face in defending the Nation and giving people a chance at having better futures.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Iowa.

BLUE SLIPS AND THE NOMINATIONS OF DAVID STRAS AND KYLE DUNCAN

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, earlier this week, I spoke about the history of the blue-slip courtesy. I hope my colleagues will read that history as well. I explained in that speech earlier this week that in my nearly four decades in the Senate, I have regularly returned my blue slip even when I would have preferred that the President had nominated someone else.

Today, I am announcing that the Judiciary Committee will hold a hearing for two circuit court nominees, each of whom has one home State Senator who has not returned a blue slip containing a positive endorsement.

The hearing for Justice David Stras, nominee to the Eighth Circuit, and Kyle Duncan, nominee to the Fifth Circuit, will take place on November 29. Both of these nominees appear to be very well qualified, and they deserve the Judiciary Committee's further consideration. I would therefore like to offer an explanation as to why I am choosing to proceed on these nomina-

tions and allow the hearing despite the lack of two positive blue slips.

As I explained earlier this week, the blue-slip courtesy is just that—a courtesy. For 100 years, the Judiciary Committee chairmen have asked for the views of home State Senators on judicial nominees via the blue-slip process. The blue slip is meant to solicit insights into nominees and ensure that the White House is adequately consulting with home State Senators as the advice part of the advice and consent would apply.

Let me be very clear. I will maintain the blue-slip courtesy, but some of my Democratic colleagues and leftwing outside groups mistakenly assert that the blue slip affords a home State Senator veto power over a nominee. That is not true. Only 2 out of the 18 previous chairmen of this committee in the last 100 years allowed a single Senator to wield veto power over a nominee.

Senator Joe Biden, when he was the Judiciary Committee chairman, articulated what I consider to be a sensible policy with regard to the blue slip. He said that a negative blue slip will be a "significant factor" for the committee to weigh, but "it will not preclude consideration of a nominee" unless the administration were to fail to consult with the Senator. I intend to follow this practice for negative and unreturned blue slips. This practice is consistent with the vast majority of the blue slip's history.

I will add that I am less likely to proceed on a district court nominee who does not have two positive blue slips from home State Senators, but circuit courts, as we know, cover multiple States. There is less reason to defer to the views of a single State's Senator for such nominees when that nominee is going to serve several States in a circuit.

It is important to remember that the judicial confirmation process has changed over the last several years. Previously, when home State Senators did not return a positive blue slip, their colleagues often defeated that very same nomination on the floor but not in committee.

When President Bush nominated Carolyn Kuhl to the Ninth Circuit, her home State Senators did not return positive blue slips. Chairman HATCH, nevertheless, held a hearing and a vote for that nominee. Her home State Senators, however, convinced their colleagues to filibuster the nominee on the Senate floor. Carolyn Kuhl was never confirmed.

A few years ago, as we know—I think it was in 2013—Democrats abolished the filibuster for nominees to the lower courts. They argued that a minority of Senators should not be allowed to block nominees who had majority support.

Our colleague, the Senator from Oregon, said: "‘Advice and consent’ was never envisioned as a check that involved a minority of the Senate being

able to block a Presidential [nomination]." Well, now that Senator is withholding his blue slip for a nominee to the Ninth Circuit. If he did not believe that 41 Senators should be able to block a nominee, he surely wouldn't believe that a single Senator would have that right.

I think the Democrats now seriously regret that they abolished the filibuster, as I warned them about at that particular time when they were trying to add a lot of people who were not needed on the DC Circuit Court of Appeals, as an example—packing the court, in other words. They cannot veto it because there is not a filibuster, so they want to use the blue slip for that purpose. It is very clear from the history of the blue slip that that is not what the blue slip was meant for.

On the other hand, some have argued that the blue-slip courtesy has no place in modern judicial confirmations. The LA Times recently suggested getting rid of the blue slip, as did the New York Times several years ago. Even our committee's ranking member, Senator FEINSTEIN, once advocated for abolishing the blue slip.

I disagree that we should abolish the blue slip. The blue slip serves the important purpose of encouraging consultation between the White House and the Senate. Otherwise, the constitutional provision of advice and consent is just consent. But there is opportunity to advise ahead of time. That is what the blue slips help to do. The blue slip serves the important purpose of encouraging consultation between the White House and the Senate. The White House has an obligation to engage in good-faith consultation with home State Senators for the purpose of advice.

I will not allow the White House to just steamroll home State Senators, but, as I have said all along, I will not allow the blue-slip process to be abused. Ever since last November, when the press had asked me about the blue slip, I have said that we are going to honor the blue-slip process but that there are always exceptions. I am not going to allow Senators to prevent a committee hearing for political or ideological reasons. Those are the least reasons not to have a hearing. Using the blue slip for these purposes is not consistent with historical practice.

This brings me to one of the two nominations we are having on November 29, that of Justice David Stras of Minnesota.

Justice Stras appears to be exceptionally well qualified. He graduated first in his class from the University of Kansas Law School. He clerked for both the Ninth Circuit and the Fourth Circuit and then for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. After several years in private practice in Minnesota, Justice Stras joined the faculty of the University of Minnesota Law School. He remained there until his appointment to the Minnesota Supreme Court in 2010. In 2012, he was

elected to a full 6-year term on the court by 56 percent of Minnesota voters. Think about one's not returning a blue slip when somebody gets 56 percent of the vote to be returned to the court.

Justice Stras was raised by a single mother in Kansas. He is the grandson of Holocaust survivors. He carries the lessons passed down by his grandparents with him each day.

I want to refer to a writing he just submitted to a leading newspaper. Writing recently about their survival in Auschwitz and then immigrating to the United States, he recalled that his grandfather had "the uncommon gift of being able to see the light of human generosity in the midst of near-total darkness."

He wrote that his grandparents embraced "a message of optimism, intended to ensure that their children and grandchildren were able to lead a life free from the atrocities that they had witnessed."

Justice Stras has an impeccable reputation in the Minnesota legal community.

His former colleagues at the University of Minnesota Law School describe him as a person who "engaged in debate respectfully, listening to opposing ideas while backing up his own views with facts and arguments" and who "wanted our students to be exposed to a wide range of beliefs."

Another group of colleagues of Justice Stras from his days in private practice describe this justice as the type of attorney who "never talked down to people" and "there was never any hint that he felt himself superior to anyone." Instead, Justice Stras "listened to others' views, and worked to find an approach to legal problems that was both effective and acceptable to everyone on the team." They also note in that letter his dedication to mentoring young lawyers.

Despite these accomplishments and accolades, one Senator has withheld his blue slip. Evidently, my colleague from Minnesota believes that Justice Stras has not even earned a hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee. But the reasons given for withholding the blue slip are not consistent with the blue slip's purposes and history.

Justice Stras was nominated to the Eighth Circuit on May 8, more than 6 months ago. After many months, my colleague formally announced that he would not return a blue slip. He cited Justice Stras's "deeply conservative judicial philosophy," as well as his admiration for Justice Thomas and Justice Scalia. To me, this amounts to an ideological litmus test: Admirers of Justice Thomas and Justice Scalia need not ever apply for being on a circuit court.

The Minnesota StarTribune's editorial board summed it up. They said the Senator from Minnesota "rejected Stras for one reason: the justice's conservative views."

The editorial board of the largest newspaper in Minnesota echoed the retired justice, Paul Anderson:

While Stras is more conservative than I would like, that is not the point. The question is whether Stras is qualified to serve on the Eighth Circuit. And he is.

My colleague later claimed that he was not adequately consulted by the White House, which would be a legitimate reason for withholding a blue slip, as I hope I have implied several times during my remarks today and before. So I looked into this by reviewing the records of consultation—and thank God the White House keeps pretty good records. It is clear the White House earnestly and repeatedly attempted to work with both home State Senators. The White House reached out to my colleague from Minnesota several times between January and May of this year to discuss the Eighth Circuit vacancy that Minnesota supplies a member for.

It wasn't until May 2 that my colleague suggested alternatives to Justice Stras. That was more than 3 months after initial contact by the White House. Nevertheless, the White House did what they should under the Constitution by listening to Senators. They considered my colleague's two suggested nominees. I am satisfied that the White House adequately tried to consult with both home State Senators as the Constitution requires under advice and consent. Therefore, I am not going to deny Justice Stras a hearing.

I would like to say a brief word about Justice Stras's supposedly rigid conservative views. The Judiciary Committee has received numerous letters attesting to Justice Stras's intellectual honesty and, probably more importantly, open-mindedness. It is clear that he has great respect for the rule of law, and his tenure on the Minnesota Supreme Court demonstrates that, like any good judge, he is able to put aside his personal views and apply the law faithfully.

One letter, written by a bipartisan group of attorneys from Justice Stras's former firm, noted that they "never doubted for a minute that he reached his decisions based on his well-considered view of the law, and not personal, political, or ideological considerations."

They went on to note:

The lawyers whose names appear at the bottom of this letter span the political spectrum, from Democrat to Republican, liberal to conservative. We differ in our political views, but we are united in our support of Justice Stras's nomination to the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals.

There are all kinds of people writing that letter—Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives. Why is a Senator concerned about the justice's ideological views when people who know him well seem to think that is not a consideration because he is going to make a good judge?

A group of former colleagues at the University of Minnesota agree. They

wrote a letter to the committee stating:

We are Minnesota law professors with diverse political views ranging from very conservative to very progressive. Some of us have appeared before Justice Stras as advocates, and all of us are familiar with his academic and judicial track records.

Now as I continue the quote, I want to say to everybody, get this:

He is no extremist, and he has approached his academic and judicial work without bias or favoritism.

This support is echoed by his colleagues in my State of Iowa. The committee has received several letters of support from the faculty at the University of Iowa College of Law where Justice Stras teaches as an adjunct professor. Among his supporters are the dean of the law school, Gail Agrawal, and Professor Sheldon Kurtz, a self-described "life-long liberal."

Justice Stras is a widely respected jurist, and he should have a hearing. Ideological differences should not prevent the committee from moving forward.

I would also like to address my decision to hold a hearing for Kyle Duncan, a nominee for the Fifth Circuit. He also has not had two positive blue slips returned. He is a widely respected appellate lawyer who has litigated over 30 cases in Federal and State appellate courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court.

My friend and colleague, Senator KENNEDY of Louisiana, has declined to return a positive blue slip. However, Senator KENNEDY expressed that while he is undecided on Mr. Duncan's nomination, he does not oppose a hearing for Mr. Duncan. This seems to me to be a very sensible approach. It is the correct distinction that a Senator should make when deciding whether to return a blue slip. The blue slip is not meant to signify the Senator's ultimate support or opposition to the nominee. It only expresses a Senator's view about whether the nominee should have a hearing.

Senator FEINSTEIN made this precise distinction in 2003 for Carolyn Kuhl's nomination. I referred to that nomination earlier in my remarks. Senator FEINSTEIN returned a blue slip which noted that she "reserved judgment" on Carolyn Kuhl. She also supported holding a hearing for Judge Kuhl. Ultimately, after Judge Kuhl's hearing, Senator FEINSTEIN decided to oppose confirmation.

Evidently, the hearing served a useful purpose, and Senator FEINSTEIN was able to distinguish between allowing a hearing and supporting a nominee. Senator KENNEDY has shown that he understands this distinction as well.

I look forward to hearing from Justice Stras and Mr. Duncan at the Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on November 29.

I think that all 100 Senators ought to look at the advice and consent clause. We have an opportunity to give advice to a President. We have an opportunity then, if that nominee comes up here, to vote for that nominee.

Do we want to preserve the “advice” part of advice and consent? If we do, I would suggest that we look at the blue slip as a useful tool for accomplishing a very important part of the process. If it is abused—at least while I am chairman, you don’t have to worry about it going away. But if it is abused, someday it will go away, and then all we are going to have, when it is all said and done, is consent.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT *pro tempore*. The majority leader.

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I listened carefully to the excellent remarks of the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, outlining the history of the blue slip. I am going to say to the chairman that he has outlined a sensible use of the blue slip, which involves consultation but does not lead to a one-Senator veto of a nominee.

I thank the chairman for the history lesson. It is a history lesson that the Senate needed to hear.

I also thank the chairman for the spectacular job that he has done all year long with this new administration in processing and bringing forward highly qualified nominees. For generations to come, Americans who follow the third branch will be indebted to the chairman for the way he has handled these nominations, processed them, moved them out on to the floor, and given the Senate the opportunity to express its will.

I wish every Member of the Senate had been able to hear the chairman’s remarks, but I am certainly going to call these remarks to the attention of our Members every opportunity I get, and I thank the Senator from Iowa.

Mr. GRASSLEY. I thank the leader.

The ACTING PRESIDENT *pro tempore*. The Senator from Nebraska.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION BILL

Mrs. FISCHER. Mr. President, I rise today to speak about the National Defense Authorization Act. The process of negotiating the annual defense bill is one that has a long and important history on Capitol Hill.

This afternoon, the Senate voted to pass a conference report, continuing a tradition of 55 consecutive years in which the National Defense Authorization Act has been a must-pass bill for the Congress. People have a habit these days of assuming that Congress cannot pass major legislation, but this bill is a testament to the fact that when it comes to supporting our men and women in uniform, we work together to provide them with the support they need. I am happy to say that this year, we are carrying on this proud tradition.

This year’s National Defense Authorization Act was passed by overwhelming bipartisan majorities in both the Senate and the House. As a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, I have been proud to do my part to help craft this bill and to be a part of the process.

We live in a rapidly changing world, and, unfortunately, one that presents a

growing number of threats and challenges that our military must face. Across the globe, we have witnessed the rise of dangerous new threats that make the mission of our warfighters even more challenging. In Europe, Vladimir Putin has shown a complete disregard for international law and order and threatens key allies and democracies that underpin the democratic backbone of Europe. In the Pacific, we face a nuclear-armed dictator in North Korea who murders his own people while threatening mass death and destruction to the United States and to our allies. In the Middle East, we have witnessed the rapid and fearsome emergence of radical extremist groups like ISIS, whose barbarism shocks the world. Their horrific acts of bloodshed show just how dangerous this warped ideology is, and the efforts of the men and women in uniform have played a critical role in the fight to stem this dark tide.

Unfortunately, this same ideology of radical extremism is finding new followers in Europe, Africa, and Asia. These threats demand that we be ready. The fact is that the United States has faced challenges before, and if one thing holds true throughout history, it is that our Armed Forces will be called upon to defeat the enemies of freedom and safeguard this Nation. For them to succeed, the Congress must provide the men and women in uniform the support they need to execute their missions. That is why I am so proud to stand before you today and speak about the National Defense Authorization Act.

This legislation sends a clear message: Now is the time that we begin to rebuild our military. Contained in this bill is the necessary funding to start filling the gaps and ensuring our force remains the best in the world. This includes increases to the size of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Reserves, and our National Guard. It also means that new, battle-ready systems are going to get the funding they need to be put in the field as quickly as possible. On land, the NDAA authorizes funding for 85 Abrams tank upgrades and 93 Bradley fighting vehicles. At sea, it revitalizes our fleet, authorizing 13 new ships for our Navy. In the air, it provides 90 new F-35 aircraft and 53 UH-60M Black Hawk helicopters.

Across all of these domains, the fiscal year 2018 NDAA authorizes funding for critical modernization priorities to help ensure that on every battlefield the men and women of America’s Armed Forces have the resources they need to complete the missions they are given.

I serve as chair of the Armed Services Committee’s Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, and my top priority has been the modernization of our nuclear forces and the Department of Energy’s nuclear weapons complex.

This bill strongly supports nuclear modernization and makes a number of other key investments within the sub-

committee’s jurisdiction. First, the conference report builds on important provisions included in the versions that passed both the House and the Senate this year, and it includes the administration’s request for additional missile defense funding, submitted earlier this month. In total, the bill authorizes an additional \$4.4 billion above the level requested by the President when the budget was initially submitted to improve our missile defense systems. This includes a significant expansion of our Ground-based Midcourse Defense system and authorizes resources to begin construction of another 20 interceptor silos at Fort Greely, AK. To further enhance the system’s effectiveness, the bill makes valuable investments in the network of radars and other sensors that support the system’s operations. The bill also contains reasonable reforms to our military space enterprise that are designed to achieve a more streamlined and agile system that is more responsive to the needs of our warfighters.

Furthermore, the bill improves the oversight and management of our nuclear command and control architecture. Often overlooked, these programs form the connective tissue between our national leadership and our nuclear forces. Their reliability and resilience are vital to the effectiveness of our nuclear deterrent.

As the specter of great power conflict returns and the threat from a nuclear-armed North Korea continues to grow, our missile defense and nuclear capabilities will play an increasingly important role in protecting our homeland. I look forward to continuing to work with my colleagues to further modernize and strengthen these vital capabilities to ensure that we stay ahead of the threats that our Nation faces.

Beyond the strategic forces portfolio, this bill recognizes that we must also rebuild our readiness and military infrastructure here at home, which is why we have included funding increases in the bill to support 90 percent of the requirements for facilities sustainment, as well as a significant increase for facilities restoration and modernization. This means newly authorized funding to restore and modernize facilities and infrastructure ranging from barracks and hospitals to runways and hangers.

But let’s not forget the most important part of our effort in crafting this bill, and that is providing for the one asset we can never replace: our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines. The people who wear the uniform are more valuable than any weapons system. The dedication, sacrifice, and honor they exemplify every day is why we stand here today and enjoy the freedoms this country has to offer. For that reason, included in this bill is the largest pay raise for our troops in 8 years.

We have also permanently preserved special survivor indemnity allowance

payments to surviving military spouses. There are more than 60,000 Americans whose spouses have died on Active Duty or during retirement and, as a result of this legislation, this important payment will no longer exist on a year-by-year basis, but it will be preserved indefinitely.

Make no mistake, these are challenging times for our Nation as the world is becoming an increasingly complex place. Now more than ever, we are asking our military to tackle difficult problems and to face adversaries who consistently seek new ways to do us harm.

No matter the day, no matter the situation, America's Armed Forces stand ready to answer the call and protect our Nation. We need to uphold our solemn duty as Members of the Senate and keep faith with those who wear the uniform by giving them the tools they need.

The 55-year legacy of passing the National Defense Authorization Act did not happen by accident. It has happened because Members of this body know and Members of this body recognize that this bill represents a promise to our servicemembers. It is a promise that, as you stand in harm's way, far from your families and loved ones, we stand with you. When you are deployed during a holiday or a special occasion, as many members of our own Nebraska National Guard will be this Thanksgiving, we stand with you. During late nights and early mornings in the cold, in the heat, in battle, and in peacetime, we stand with you.

Passing the National Defense Authorization Act means keeping our end of the promise to those who serve. As a Member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, it has been my honor to play a part in helping to craft this year's bill, and I would like to thank our chairman, Senator JOHN MCCAIN, for his leadership in guiding the committee through the process. I would also like to thank America's men and women in uniform for all that they do to keep us safe.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. SASSE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION

Mr. SASSE. Mr. President, the consideration of Federal judges with lifetime appointments is perhaps the most important and long-lasting work this body will do between now and the end of the year.

Every Senator—Republican and Democrat—took an oath to perform this duty. Nobody took an oath to outsource this duty to any outside organization. Unfortunately, some of my

colleagues on the Senate Judiciary Committee are apparently willing to hand over their voting cards to the American Bar Association, based on the claim that the ABA is an unbiased, indifferent umpire that just calls balls and strikes.

The American Bar Association is not neutral. The ABA is a liberal organization that has publicly and consistently advocated for left-of-center positions for more than two decades now. The ABA has no right to special treatment by Members of this body.

It is pretty simple. If you are playing in the game, you don't get to cherry-pick who the referees are.

Take, for just a moment, a look at the amicus briefs they have filed in recent years.

In the District of Columbia v. Heller, the ABA supported denying an individual their constitutional right to keep and bear arms.

In Christian Legal Society v. Martinez, the ABA supported forcing Christian organizations on campuses to accept members that reject their faith.

In Medellin v. Texas, the ABA supported forcing States to recognize the judgments of the world court in order to stop the execution of a gruesome murderer.

In United States v. Windsor, the ABA supported the recognition of same-sex marriage through judicial fiat rather than through legislative debate.

In Arizona v. United States, the ABA supported a constitutional ban on State and local law enforcement assisting in enforcing Federal immigration laws.

The list goes on. In each of these cases, the ABA decided to weigh into divisive and contentious issues. This is their right, indeed, but it is definitely not neutral. In each of these cases, and many more, the ABA took what can only be described as a left-of-center position. In each of these cases, the ABA was picking a side.

Again—to be clear—they are absolutely allowed to do this. It is what makes this country great. But it is laughably naive to suggest that they are an objective and neutral organization. They are not.

The ABA cannot make liberal arguments to the nine members of the Supreme Court, and then walk across the street and seriously expect that the 100 Members of this body in the Senate will be treating them like unbiased appraisers. That is essentially what Attorney General Bill Barr said in 1992 when the ABA first began to openly take pro-abortion positions—which, by the way, led to thousands of members quitting in protest because those members knew that the ABA claims to neutrality about political issues were no longer even possibly defensible.

Then—U.S. Attorney General Bill Barr commented on the ABA's pro-abortion advocacy at the time by saying: "By adopting the resolution and thereby endorsing one side of this debate, the ABA will endanger the perception that

it is an impartial and objective association."

Twenty-five years later, Barr's words were right. His words ring true.

Again, I want to be perfectly clear. The ABA is allowed to have any view that its members want to have, and they are allowed to advocate and to protest on behalf of those views and on behalf of their members. This is America, and that is exactly what the First Amendment is about. That is fine. But what is not fine is that the ABA, which is a liberal advocacy organization, would masquerade as a neutral and objective evaluator of judicial candidates.

The ABA cannot take blatantly liberal positions on the one hand, and then masquerade as a neutral party on the other, and then demand a special seat at the table in the Senate Judiciary Committee and in the Senate—in this body—to try to tell us who is and isn't supposedly qualified to be a judge.

Just as the ABA has every right to advance its liberal policy positions, every Senator has the right—and indeed, the duty—to give our advice and consent on judicial nominees. If Senators decide that they like and value the ABA's policy positions and they like and value the ABA's rating, they are free to give them due deference and consideration, but don't hide behind it.

Don't pretend that the ABA is something that it is not. Do not ignore the facts of what the ABA has become. The American people deserve honesty, not thinly veiled partisanship.

Thank you.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Rhode Island.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION BILL

Mr. REED. Mr. President, I rise to discuss the fiscal year 2018 National Defense Authorization Act.

After several months of negotiations, the House and Senate Armed Services Committees have arrived at a completed conference agreement. Earlier today, we passed the NDAA for the 56th consecutive year.

Let me highlight some of the important issues that we addressed in this agreement. This conference agreement authorizes a total of \$692 billion, which includes \$626.4 billion in base budget funding for the Department of Defense and certain security activities of the Department of Energy and \$65.8 billion in overseas contingency operations, or OCO, funding.

Of course, we could not have done it without the cooperation of all the members of the committee, including the Presiding Officer, and I thank him for his contribution and his service.

This includes the administration's \$5.9 billion budget amendment we received earlier this month, which seeks an additional \$4.7 billion in base budget funding to bolster missile defense and to repair two Navy ships after recent collisions, as well as \$1.2 billion in OCO funding for operations in Afghanistan and for additional capabilities in the Central Command area of operations.

The conference agreement includes significant increases in additional resources aimed at restoring full spectrum readiness, as soon as possible, across the military services. Specifically, operation and maintenance funding, widely known as the lifeblood readiness, was increased by \$1.16 billion for the Army, \$277.9 million for the Navy, \$82.3 million for the Marine Corps, and \$1 billion for the U.S. Air Force.

This conference agreement supports the topline of \$700 billion for national defense, or 050, activities, which is roughly \$150 billion over the Budget Control Act cap. If the cap is not adjusted and if this amount is fully funded by the appropriators, then we would trigger the harmful across-the-board cuts of sequestration, just at the time when we are trying to restore readiness.

I want to be clear. I agree that the DOD needs additional resources. But we must address the caps for both defense and nondefense activities.

I remind my colleagues that under the Budget Control Act, or BCA, national defense activities include certain programs at the FBI and the Coast Guard, while nondefense activities include the State Department, veterans' care, Customs and Border Protection, and the TSA. We need to look at our Nation's needs holistically, and we must remain vigilant over the amount of money the DOD can effectively utilize. We have to look at national security, and that includes both sides and both caps.

With regard to our overseas operations, the conference report authorizes the entirety of the funding request for our efforts in Afghanistan, including \$1.7 billion to invest in critical aviation capabilities, such as close air support platforms and modernized rotary wing assets, and to continue to sustain and train the existing fleet.

The report also authorizes 3,500 special immigrant visas to continue to uphold our commitments to the many brave Afghans who have provided critical support to the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. In this regard, let me thank Chairman MCCAIN and Senator SHAHEEN, without whose efforts this provision would not have been included, I believe, in the final conference.

The conference report continues robust support for our counterterrorism efforts against ISIS, al-Qaida, and the other violent extremist groups, including approximately \$1.8 billion for the Train and Equip Programs in Iraq and Syria. It also fully funds the Department's budget request for U.S. Special Operations Command.

With this bill, we will enhance public transparency and congressional oversight of military operations and the policies that underpin them. Most notably, it requires a public articulation of the legal and policy frameworks governing the use of military force outside of declared war zones, as well as additional reporting on civilian casualty

incidents and DOD efforts to prevent them.

The conference report includes a requirement for the Secretary of Defense to appoint a senior official in the Department to lead an effort to harness and integrate all of the Department's capabilities to confront and defeat the kind of strategic influence operations that Russia has conducted against us and our allies over the last 2 years. It is vital that the Defense Department integrate its cyber capabilities with its information warfare experts to provide capabilities and options in time for next year's election cycle in the United States and to support our allies in Europe against Russian operations directed against them.

Additionally, the conference report includes a requirement for the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State to develop and report to Congress on a comprehensive, whole-of-government strategy to counter the Russian malign influence threat. Such a detailed strategy must include measures to defend against and deter Russian activities related to national security, including hybrid warfare, cyber attacks, and information operations.

The 2018 NDAA also authorizes the Secretary of Defense to establish the Indo-Asia-Pacific Stability Initiative, which will be used to improve our posture in the Asia-Pacific region and provide additional resources to increase partner capacity and multilateral exercises in the region.

The Chief of Naval Operations' Force Structure Assessment from last winter identified a goal of 355 ships, including 66 attack submarines. This bill makes a good downpayment on that goal by adding five ships to the budget, including one DDG-51 destroyer, two littoral combat ships, one LX(R) amphibious ship, and one expeditionary sea base.

Perhaps not as dramatic, but no less important, is the addition of \$698 million in the budget request to allow the Navy to begin expanding the submarine industrial base. Achieving the CNO's force structure goal will require adding 18 attack submarines to the previous force structure goal of 48 boats.

This will be no small challenge since retirement of older submarines will exceed deliveries of new submarines. During the 10-year period of 1991 to 2000, we ordered only four attack submarines—Connecticut, Jimmy Carter, Virginia, and Texas—so we have to do some catching up.

Providing the resources for the Navy to expand the submarine industrial base in an orderly fashion will be a critical element of efficiency and a critical element in building up our fleet.

The conference fully supports the budget requests for the modernization of the triad and its nuclear command and control to ensure we can deter existential threats to our homeland. Our triad of submarines, ICBMs, and bombers have been in service for decades and must be replaced.

Secretary Ash Carter put the situation eloquently when he said that a failure to do so, in his words, "would mean losing confidence in our ability to deter, which we can't afford in today's volatile security environment."

In the area of technology and acquisition, I am pleased that this bill shows strong support for the Department's network of labs and test ranges, which help drive efforts to maintain our battlefield technological superiority. In particular, I think this bill makes significant strides in enabling DOD to develop and buy the modern software and IT systems that are integral to every system, platform, and business system in the Department of Defense. Additionally, it reauthorizes the Defense Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research to expand the number of universities capable of working with the Pentagon on advanced research.

The bill also pushes DOD to make use of advanced "Big Data" techniques to manage its business functions and processes. New ways of collecting, analyzing, and applying the lessons of data are revolutionizing the commercial world. It is time that DOD applied these same techniques to lower costs and save money and time.

The conference report also includes a provision that would allow the Army to transfer all excess firearms no longer actively issued for military service to an organic facility for the purpose of melting and repurposing. This provision not only allows the Army to divest itself of these weapons, but it will also provide a steady stream of work to our organic foundries. These are an important part of our arsenal system.

Furthermore, the provision will authorize the Secretary of the Army to annually designate additional excess firearms that are no longer in military use to be repurposed. This common-sense approach will allow the Army to save money on storage costs, as well as repurposing these excess weapons for higher priority needs identified by the Army.

I am also pleased that the conference report builds on a markup amendment by Senator NELSON that directs the Department to conduct a threat assessment and deliver a master plan for climate change adaptation.

The conference report includes House language from my colleague Congressman JIM LANGEVIN that codifies several findings related to climate change and expresses the sense of Congress that climate change is a threat to our national security.

In the area of military personnel, the conference agreement accomplishes much on behalf of our servicemembers and the Department of Defense. The bill authorizes a 2.4-percent across-the-board pay raise for our troops and extends authority to pay over 30 bonuses and special pays to encourage recruitment, retention, and continued services.

It also includes authority for service Secretaries to extend by an additional year the time that the recruits may remain in the Delayed Entry Program to ensure that background checks are completed, so that they are not unnecessarily separated due to the fault of government. These are individuals who are here illegally. Their status is a result of their joining the MAVNI Program. If this program were terminated, we would lose their service to our military forces and they would be forced to leave the country.

Additionally, the bill permanently extends the special survivor indemnity allowance under the Survivor Benefit Plan, which was due to expire early next year. This ensures that widows of our veterans and servicemembers who die of service-connected causes will continue to receive their monthly benefit and authorizes annual cost-of-living adjustments to this benefit going forward.

With regard to military family care, the report authorizes \$50 million for impact aid, including \$40 million in supplemental impact aid and \$10 million—twice the usual amount—for military children with severe disabilities. For military families and for local school systems all across this country, this impact aid is absolutely essential. Furthermore, it requires the Department to improve pediatric care and related services for children of members of the military.

This bill will also improve military family readiness by addressing the shortage of qualified childcare workers, requiring that the realities of military life be considered in setting the operating hours of childcare centers, and by increasing flexibility for families when the military requires them to move.

Let me conclude by stating the obvious. The reason this bill passed was because of the extraordinary bipartisan leadership of Senator JOHN MCCAIN and also because of the extraordinary bipartisan leadership of Chairman MAC THORNBERRY of the House Armed Services Committee and Ranking Member ADAM SMITH. I look forward to working with them in the future.

Finally, the conference agreement would not have been possible without the hard work of the entire committee staff, who worked diligently to help finalize this agreement. I thank Chris Brose, Eric Swabb, and all the majority committee staff for their hard work this past year. On the minority side, I thank my staff director, Elizabeth King. I also thank Gary Leeling, Creighton Greene, Carolyn Chuhta, Maggie McNamara, Jonathan Clark, Jonathan Epstein, Jorie Feldman, Ozge Guzelsu, Jody Bennett, Kirk McConnell, Bill Monahan, Mike Noblet, John Quirk, Arun Seraphin, and Jon Green.

Let me state the obvious: They do the work. Sometimes we get the credit, but the work is theirs. I am deeply appreciative of all of their efforts.

Again, let me indicate what is obvious to all our colleagues. Without the

inspirational, practical, dynamic, and unrelenting leadership of Chairman MCCAIN, we would not be at this moment today—the 56th consecutive passage of the National Defense Authorization Act.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. BLUNT). The Senator from Maine.

Mr. KING. Mr. President, before addressing the topic that I want to take up—and I know it is one that is near and dear to the Presiding Officer's heart—which is rural healthcare, I want to express my admiration and thanks to Senator REED, the Senator from Rhode Island, and Senator MCCAIN for their incredible leadership of the Armed Services Committee. They show us what it is like to lead. They show us what it is like to take on difficult issues and to work out difficult problems, and I would like to express my appreciation to them for that.

I see the Senator—

Mr. SASSE. Will the Senator from Maine yield for 30 seconds?

Mr. KING. Absolutely.

Mr. SASSE. I would just like to associate myself with your comments, sir, in praising the ranking member.

Senator REED went through a long list of people who have gotten the NDAA across the finish line for more than half a century in a row.

As a newbie rookie in this body, I have to say that serving with the two of you on the Armed Services Committee is a real privilege and honor. Much of the body doesn't work very well right now, but that committee works incredibly well.

So I want to agree with the Senator from Maine that the ranking member is a huge part of why the Armed Services Committee works so well.

Thank you, sir.

Mr. KING. I thank the Senator.

I say to Senator REED, I appreciate your leadership.

Mr. REED. I thank the Senator from Maine and the Senator from the great State of Nebraska.

Mr. SASSE. I thought you were buying time.

Mr. REED. No. Once again, we have been following Senator MCCAIN, and he took us all the way. Thank you.

HEALTHCARE

Mr. KING. Mr. President, I did a mathematic calculation a couple of years ago, and it resulted in an interesting conclusion. The Senate is a rural body. Eighteen Members of the U.S. Senate represent a majority of Americans. That means 82 percent—or 82 out of 100 Senators—represent smaller States, more rural communities.

Today, I want to talk about a disastrous development that is headed for our rural communities that we have the capability to fix, and it is one we should fix sooner rather than later. I am talking about Federal funding for federally qualified health centers, which expired on October 1. Seventy percent of the funding for the FQHCs expired on October 1. One hundred per-

cent of the National Health Service Corps funding expired on October 1.

These are vital programs that serve rural America and provide incredibly important healthcare services. They are an overlooked part of our national healthcare system, in part because they are traditionally in rural and out-back locations.

In Maine, we have 20 centers and 70 facilities scattered all over our State, and they are providing services every day to over 200,000 people. This is a vital part of our healthcare system. Yet the funding expired at the end of September, and so far nothing has been done.

How important is it? In Maine, there are 1,700 employees at these facilities; a total economic impact of over \$300 million a year; \$8 million in State and local tax revenue and \$32 million in Federal tax revenue. They provide \$16 million worth of uncompensated care that goes to Maine people who need the help. They are efficient. In Maine, they have saved Medicaid over \$100 million, and \$257 million is the estimate for what they have saved the overall healthcare system. Again, FQHCs provide 1,700 jobs and support another 1,000 jobs in their communities.

But this isn't only about economics and economic development and jobs; it is about healthcare. One in six people in Maine gets their healthcare from FQHCs—210,000 people. They accept everybody who comes to their door. I have been to them all over the State. They use a sliding-fee scale for people who are low income, who don't have insurance, and they provide all manner of services. It depends on the center; different centers have different services. They have medical, behavioral health, dental, substance abuse treatment and support, case management, optometry, podiatry, OB/GYN, prescription assistance, outreach and enrollment, pharmacy, radiology, and school-based healthcare services. These are the healthcare providers for rural America. And it is not only Maine; it is across the country. There are 10,000 sites across the United States. Some 26 million patients are at risk.

Well, what is the big deal? The big deal is that people are going to lose their healthcare services. We estimate that in Maine, we are going to lose about 400 clinicians and administrative and support staff who will have to be laid off at the beginning of the year unless we solve this problem in the immediate future. At least 25 of these sites will be forced to close, and we believe there will be almost 30,000 Maine residents who will lose access to their healthcare system.

Most of the FQHCs—federally qualified health centers—are getting by on their funding from last year, so the expiration of the funding hasn't hit them yet, but it will begin to hit them on January 1. That is what we have to respond to.

It is also already having an effect just by creating uncertainty. I got an

impassioned letter from the leader of one of our centers in Maine about the fact that they have been very diligently recruiting a dentist to come to their community. Dentists are very hard to come by in rural America. They had one who was ready to come, and then suddenly they heard about the uncertainty surrounding the funding—that it may or may not come through—and that dentist is now reconsidering their decision to go to this Maine community. That is a tragedy. That is a tragedy for the people of that town, where these services are literally not available.

So what does it matter? It matters because we are talking about people losing their healthcare services.

This has never been a partisan issue. I don't think there is a heck of a lot of debate around here about the importance of FQHCs and that we need to get them refunded. In fact, the Presiding Officer and Senator STABENOW have sponsored a bill, the CHIME Act, that would resolve this issue. We just need to get it on the floor and get it done.

We have proved today by the passage of the National Defense Authorization Act that we can take major issues, bring them to the floor, and move them forward, especially those that aren't particularly controversial. But my concern is that even though there doesn't seem to be controversy, it is just not happening, and now our centers are having to make plans for layoffs, for closures, and for closing their doors to the people who need the care.

This is something we can do. This is something we can resolve. It is within our power. The legislation is ready to go, and we should get this done.

We are leaving today for the Thanksgiving holiday, but if we leave at the end of the year and haven't done this, it will be a tragedy for rural America. It will be a betrayal of rural America. It will be a betrayal of our constituents.

All of us have been to these centers and seen the care that they provide, the caring that they provide, the passion that the people bring to the services in their communities, and how much they mean to their communities. This is one of the best Federal programs ever created, and it has always been supported on a bipartisan basis.

I urge my colleagues today to prepare ourselves to get this done as soon as we possibly can when we get back after Thanksgiving. We have so much to be thankful for, and I want my people in Maine to realize that they can be thankful for those health centers that are literally lifelines in their communities and mean so much to them. I believe this is something we can and should and will do.

Thank you, Mr. President, and thank you for being a leader on this issue.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the en bloc consideration of the following nominations: Executive Calendar Nos. 461, 462, 464, 478, 479, 480, 488, and 490.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The clerk will report the nominations en bloc.

The legislative clerk read the nominations of Joseph Kernan, of Florida, to be Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence; Guy B. Roberts, of Virginia, to be an Assistant Secretary of Defense; Robert L. Wilkie, of North Carolina, to be Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness; Robert Behler, of Pennsylvania, to be Director of Operational Test and Evaluation, Department of Defense; Thomas B. Modly, of Maryland, to be Under Secretary of the Navy; James F. Geurts, of Pennsylvania, to be an Assistant Secretary of the Navy; Robert H. McMahon, of Georgia, to be an Assistant Secretary of Defense; and Shon J. Manasco, of Texas, to be an Assistant Secretary of the Air Force.

Thereupon, the Senate proceeded to consider the nominations en bloc.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate vote on the nominations en bloc with no intervening action or debate; that if confirmed, the motions to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table en bloc; that the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action; that no further motions be in order; and that any statements relating to the nominations be printed in the RECORD.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the Kernan, Roberts, Wilkie, Behler, Modly, Geurts, McMahon, and Manasco nominations en bloc?

The nominations were confirmed en bloc.

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the en bloc consideration of the following nominations: Executive Calendar Nos. 491, 492, 493, 494, and all nominations placed on the Secretary's desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The clerk will report the nominations en bloc.

The legislative clerk read the nominations of Rebecca Eliza Gonzales, of Texas, a Career Member of the Senior Foreign Service, Class of Minister-

Counselor, to be Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United States of America to the Kingdom of Lesotho; Lisa A. Johnson, of Washington, a Career Member of the Senior Foreign Service, Class of Counselor, to be Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United States of America to the Republic of Namibia; Irwin Steven Goldstein, of New York, to be Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy; Sean P. Lawler, of Maryland, to be Chief of Protocol, and to have the rank of Ambassador during his tenure of service; PN1199 FOREIGN SERVICE nominations (169) beginning Lisa-Felicia Afi Akorli, and ending Stephanie P. Wilson, which nominations were received by the Senate and appeared in the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD of November 1, 2017; and PN1200 FOREIGN SERVICE nominations (4) beginning John R. Bass, II, and ending Sung Y. Kim, which nominations were received by the Senate and appeared in the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD of November 1, 2017.

Thereupon, the Senate proceeded to consider the nominations en bloc.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate vote on the nominations en bloc with no intervening action or debate; that if confirmed, the motions to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table en bloc; that the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action; that no further motions be in order; and that any statements relating to the nominations be printed in the RECORD.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the Gonzales, Johnson, Goldstein, and Lawler nominations and all nominations placed on the Secretary's desk in the Foreign Service en bloc?

The nominations were confirmed en bloc.

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the en bloc consideration of the following nominations: Executive Calendar Nos. 475, 476, and 477.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The clerk will report the nominations en bloc.

The legislative clerk read the nominations of James Thomas Abbott, of Virginia, to be a Member of the Federal Labor Relations Authority for a term of five years expiring July 1, 2020; Colleen Kiko, of North Dakota, to be a Member of the Federal Labor Relations Authority for a term of five years expiring July 29, 2022; and Ernest W. Dubester, of Virginia, to be a Member of the Federal Labor Relations Authority for a term of five years expiring July 1, 2019.

Thereupon, the Senate proceeded to consider the nominations en bloc.